

Jan 1st, 12:00 AM

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Engel-Enright, Carol; Miller, Nancy J.; and Worrell, Jennifer, "What Works for Small Apparel Manufacturing: Issues Affecting Reshoring" (2017). *International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA) Annual Conference Proceedings*. 40.

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What Works for Small Apparel Manufacturing: Issues Affecting Reshoring

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Key Words: Manufacturing, Apparel, Reshoring, Strategic Planning

Problem: The consumer base cares about how and where apparel and products are sourced. The gap has shrunk for macroeconomic factors and manufacturing costs of domestic versus overseas (Friedman, 2015). New business models for manufacturing are being encouraged by apparel companies. Dan English, founder of Voormi and former Microsoft executive states, “We are trying to challenge the proven business model. It’s not about a 100 worker manufacturer plant, but a collective of 10 10-person plants” (Blevins, 2015). Stoll and Ha-Brookshire (2012) researched SME’s in apparel and textiles and recommended case studies of business owners for holistic perspectives to gain new insights and motivations for success. Case analysis of successful organizational characteristics will provide valuable understanding to shape strategies in the formation and advancement of similar businesses. This is the first step in a National Science Foundation supported investigation of evolving innovative US supply chain linkages that support development of small apparel manufacturing centers across a southwestern state. As entrepreneurial apparel manufacturing firms develop, learning from history and from those who have gone before will enhance strategic planning and organization.

Literature and Research Questions: In research conducted before the recession and movement to off shore production, Bailey’s (1993) case study of 21 different apparel manufacturing organizations suggested production processes where workers played a role in production improvements and product innovation evidenced a stronger competitive force than the more traditional mass production system. Piore and Sabel (1984) also argued that a system of ‘flexible specialization’ allowed for a greater variety of products and shortened product life cycles. They called for a customized production approach where skilled craft workers produce increased number of styles and shorten production runs as a response to competitive pressures. We provide a case study of a small US apparel manufacturing business organized in 2014 to meet the needs of local and regional industry, while creating sustainable, dignified jobs. The company defined itself as, ‘a social enterprise with a sewing machine at its heart’. After initial success with small batch apparel and sewn goods production, the business faced difficulties in meeting production demands. Leveraging findings generated from case studies of the experiences in small apparel manufacturers led to the following research questions:

RQ 1: What were the original plans and how were plans adapted as the business developed?

RQ 2: What internal and external challenges and opportunities affected firm productivity?

RQ 3: What valuable lessons are evident for advancing small US apparel manufacturing firms?

Methods: To address the research questions involved in this early stage work, we followed qualitative research methodology in conducting a case study of a small apparel manufacturer.

Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with the owner and founder of the manufacturing firm. The interviews focused on Bailey's (1993) and Piore and Sabel's (1984) approach to apparel production organizations, and offered the ability to express descriptions of experiences and opinions. Following transcription of interviews, three researchers independently open coded and organized the data addressing the three research questions. Inter-rater reliability was established through comparison, discussion, and negotiation of the emerging themes.

Findings: The following six themes emerged as addressing the three research questions: RQ1- Internal or Institutional History, RQ2- External Environment, Skilled Craft Workers, Customized Production, RQ3- Response to Competitive Pressures and Planning. The themes were compared to earlier findings set forth by Bailey (1993) and Piore and Sabel (1984), along with information regarding the reshoring of apparel production (Amos, 2017). Internal challenges involved the need for stronger anticipatory planning and unified leadership. Competitive pressures resulted from lack of capacity for meeting production demands in scale and in turn-around time. The search for and retention of skilled craft workers affected both the internal and external environment. A shortage of qualified craft workers in most areas of apparel manufacturing impacted overall efficiency, production schedules, workflow, and project adoption.

Discussion, Future Research and Implications: Overall lessons learned that could advance emerging small manufacturing businesses include the recognized importance of brand creation, as well as building an organizational structure with cohesive alignment. Further research is needed, but there is the indication that to enrich the building of a strong business model, the ability to collaborate or network with other similar small manufacturing centers could play an important role in meeting large orders or providing training for workers, as per English's suggested collective 10 10-person plants (Blevins, 2015). The owner and founder indicated a need for consistent and readily available training. Amos (2017) predicts there will be a lack of capacity to meet the increasing demand for skilled craft workers as more and more apparel companies seek domestic manufacturing.

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